

CONSERVATION Showcase

Restoring Grasslands

If you asked New Mexico rancher Dusty Hunt, a proud member of the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association, what are the good things he is doing for his family and himself, he would include in his list grassland restoration. Sound a little abstract? Not at all.

"The one person who desperately needs to see my watershed improve, is me," said Hunt. "This is my livelihood."

This perspective on Hunt's part pushed him to become a driving force behind the U.S. Forest Service and others to develop the funding to pursue a major grassland restoration project in the Mangus Watershed in the Gila.

The Grant Soil & Water Conservation District had similar concerns and saw that pinon and juniper trees were taking over the area and causing both rill and severe erosion. According to Hunt the overgrowth of pinon-juniper was causing nutrient and sediment problems at the expense of ground cover, and was due to the lack of fire in the area. With the determination of Hunt and



the Conservation District behind the movement, the Conservation District secured a 319 Grant from the New Mexico State Environment Department and packaged it with Forest Service and private funds for grassland/watershed restoration.

Grassland/watershed restoration in the Mangus Watershed meant prescribed burns and erosion control structures – lots of them. The USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service assisted throughout the process with technical expertise and some funding.

"We learned a great deal," said Gary Garrison, Silver City district conservationist. "They do not call pinon-juniper an asbestos forest without reason. It is really tough to

burn because there is little fine fuel; that is, grass under the trees and shrubs."

With persistence, however, the results were burning of over 25,000 acres and construction of 254 erosion control structures. This large effort has yielded a landscape that is now coming back as open woodland that directly benefits Hunt, other ranchers, wildlife, hunters, hikers, and other users of the Mangus.

Dusty Hunt is a complex package of cattle grower, conservationist, and family provider who understands well that if his land prospers, so will he. But, it is not a complex equation to him – the answer is just pursuit of sound land management.